

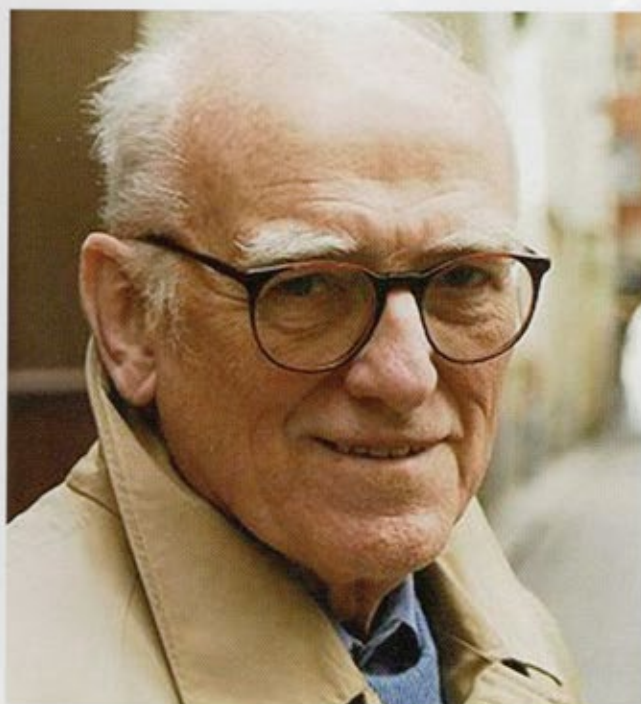
Beautiful Little Machines Made of Chrome

By Stephen King

I first met Don Westlake, although I didn't know it then, when I was seventeen and picked up a copy of *The Score* in the small-town drugstore a mile from my small-town high school. That book, credited to Richard Stark, was like a short, sharp jab straight to the nerve-endings and the imagination. The hero (I later learned the correct term was "antihero") was a thief named Parker. Always just Parker. With a name like that he could be anybody, but there was no one like Parker. That book and the ones I read after—I inhaled all of the Parker novels—were a revelation to a kid just then learning his trade. The prose was matter-of-fact, stripped to the bone, perfect for the subject matter. The plots locked together like beautiful little machines made of pure chrome.

I met him for the second time under his real name, when my wife introduced me to the comic novels about Dortmunder, who bumbled his way in and out of more jams than Inspector Clouseau. Tabitha loved those books, and I did, too. When I learned that Richard Stark and Donald E. Westlake were the same guy, I was surprised only for a minute, because it made perfect sense. Parker and Dortmunder were dark and light, yin and yang, opposite sides of the same coin. And whether it was Stark or Westlake, grim or funny, the plots locked together like beautiful little machines made of pure chrome.

I met him for the third time in the flesh. This was at Mohonk Mountain House in upstate New York, where for years Don ran the Mohonk Mystery Weekends. Ran them? Hell, he was the ringmaster, and what a job he (with help from his wife, Abby)

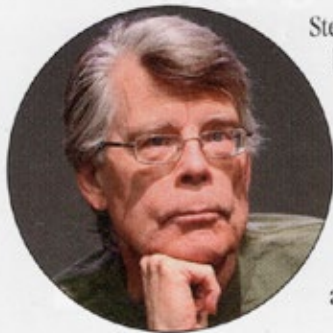


did—writer, director, script supervisor, cheerleader, organizer, toastmaster. Each weekend had its own theme. The one I participated in was a little like the mystery-horror movies that Universal peddled back in the 1930s and 40s. My friend Peter Straub played a vampire, his face cold-creamed to the appropriate pallor, his lips reddened with Revlon to the correct vulpine hue. I, with my shaggy hair and shaggier beard, got to play a wolfman. The best character—I wish I could remember who played her—was a gypsy seer with a marvelous name only Don Westlake could have thought up: Maria Openskya.

I can't remember which group of fan participants won, and it doesn't really matter, because everybody had a blast. And do you know what? The solution to the mystery made perfect sense. When explained, the plot locked together like a beautiful little machine made of pure chrome.

I have known some brilliant writers with piss-poor social skills. Don was not of that breed. He was gregarious, thoughtful, well read, cheerful, and energetic. What I remember best is his laugh. You had to laugh along with him, and I often did. He wrote under a score of names (if you don't know his Tucker Coe novels, you should), was nominated for an Academy Award (for his adaptation of Jim Thompson's *The Grifters*), and wrote *The Stepfather*, one of the scariest

movies ever made. His loss to the mystery community—and the larger literary community it inhabits—leaves a hole that absolutely cannot be filled. But we have his books, each one put together like a beautiful little machine of pure chrome. And for those of us lucky enough to have known him a little, we have the memory of his conversation and his laugh. A man who could laugh like that knew how to live as well as how to write.



Stephen King, in his own words, says: I was born in 1947 and started selling my fiction in 1970. Although horror writers like Richard Matheson and Robert Bloch were a big influence on my work, I learned most of my chops from people like John D. MacDonald, Ed McBain... and Don Westlake. (King was also awarded MWA's Grand Master in 2007.)